

## How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Book Review)

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Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, is a classic of anti-imperialist literature. At the core is the concept of development and contemporary Marxism as the main theoretical underpinning. Both concept and theory is utilized to explore, evaluate and explain the historical exploitation and the damage done to African development. He denounces the global capitalist system early in the literature by "reinforcing the conclusion that African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system," (Rodney, 1973: Preface). From a historical materialist perspective, Rodney delivers the argument that both European power politics and European economic exploitation and oppression led to the impoverishment of African societies.

The main subject matter analyzed in the book has a rich socio-historical context. The book contains six chapters and at least two sections within the following chapters: *Some Questions on Development*, *How Africa Developed Before the Coming of the Europeans up to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Africa's Contribution to European Capitalist Development-The Pre-Colonial Period*, *Europe and the Roots of African Underdevelopment-to 1885*, *Africa's Contribution to the Capitalist Development of Europe-The Colonial Period* and *Colonialism as a System for Underdeveloping Africa*. Within these chapters, political economy, popular struggles, technology, power, politics and culture are analyzed, in addition to other socio-historical contexts.

The initial chapter introduces and examines the question of development and underdevelopment. Chapter two provides solid examples and an overview of the African state. The third chapter lifts up a myriad of pre-colonial African contributions to the European capitalist system on the underdevelopment of Africa and the development of Europe into an imperialist. Chapter four focuses on how the Europeans started the underdevelopment of Africa at the Berlin conference of 1885. Under the leadership of Chairman Otto Von Bismark of Germany, the partition of Africa was done in Germany. Following this revelation, Rodney introduces the exploited and

oppressed slave trade era and how the slave trade led to the decline of economic and technological development in Africa prior to and during colonization. Chapter five discusses African contribution to the European capitalist system during the colonial period and chapter six summarizes the various strategies utilized for underdevelopment during colonization. Moreover, Rodney provides strategies to combat underdevelopment in Africa at the close of the chapter.

The main theory used for analysis is historical materialism, or Marxism. Historical materialists believe power and private ownership based in economic and material production must be abandoned because it leads to the concentration of power among the capitalists, or the elites. It also leads to alienation, the creation of ideology, class structure and social inequality. Karl Marx is the founding father of historical materialism, for his theory would greatly influence Frederick Engels, Antonio Gramsci, V.I. Lenin, W.E.B. Dubois and Walter Rodney. Marx believes man possesses an unlimited capacity to develop and reach his highest potential under social circumstances that are equal (Zeitlin, 2001:140). He believes any social circumstance that represses man's creative capabilities is virtually harmful and should not be (Zeitlin, 2001:140).

As a historical materialist, Walter Rodney focuses on colonialism, imperialism and liberation struggles (Katz-Fishman, Gomes and Scott, 2007:2838). With a Marxist perspective, he states that "power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations within any group and between groups. It implies the ability to defend one's interests and if necessary to impose ones will by any means available. In relations between peoples, the question of power determines maneuverability in bargaining, the extent to which a people survive as a physical and cultural entity. When one society finds itself forced to relinquish its power entirely, that is a form of underdevelopment," (Rodney, 1973: Ch.6:115)

Marx openly expresses his contempt for the industrial capital system. Using the labor theory of value, Marx analyzed the relationship between wage labor and productive capital. He argued that "the profit of the capitalist was based on the exploitation of the laborer," (Ritzer, 2004: 25). Marx views industrial capital and wage labor as interdependent entities. In the industrial capital system, wages (labor power) are essentially treated as a priced commodity dictated by the supply and demand of all commodities. He thus concludes that the more the wage labor produces for the elites, the more the elites capitalize, therefore, the greater the social distinction between the two emerges.

Rodney utilizes this theory throughout the book. For example, in chapter three: *Africa's Contribution to European Capitalist Development—the Pre-Colonial Period*, Rodney lifts up Europe's assumption of power to make decisions within the international trading

system (Rodney, 1973: Ch.3:3). He illustrates that “international law,” which regulated the conduct of nations on the high seas was simply European law and Africans did not participate in its conception and Africans were really exploited, for the law identified them as transportable merchandise (Rodney, 1973: Ch.3:3). These victims known as transportable merchandise came to be known as slaves. Rodney notes that Europeans used the superiority of their ships and cannon to gain control of the world’s waterways, commencing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This ownership and power eventually leads to domination of the seas, transforming several parts of Africa and Asia into economic satellites (Rodney, 1973: Ch.3:3).

Rodney also utilizes Marx’s labor theory of value throughout the book. For example, chapter five: *Africa’s Contribution to the Capitalist Development of Europe—the Colonial Period*, Rodney highlights colonialism as not simply a system of exploitation, but a system whose essential purpose was to return the profits to the “mother country” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.5:1). Earlier in the chapter he states that “the exploitation of land and labor is essential for human social advance, but only on the assumption that the product is made available within the area where the exploitation takes place,” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.5:1). However, in Africa, this did not occur. Yes, there was ongoing expatriation of surplus produced by African labor out of African resources. Yet, “it meant the development of Europe as part of the same dialectical process in which Africa was underdeveloped” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.5:1).

In Chapter three, *Africa’s Contribution to European Capitalist Development – the Pre-Colonial Period*, Rodney discusses Africa’s contribution to the economy and beliefs of early capitalist Europe. He mentions that Karl Marx was “the most bitter critic of capitalism,” and what Europe benefited from was obtained through the relentless exploitation and oppression of Africans and American Indians (Rodney, 1973: Ch.3:8). In addition, Rodney states that Marx noted that “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the turning of Africa into a commercial warrant for the hunting of black skins signalized the “rosy” dawn of the era of capitalist production” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.3:8). Now that is deep!

The use of historical materialism brings to the analysis that social change is revolutionary (anti-capitalist) and part of the solution. As noted earlier, Rodney states, “African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system” (Rodney, 1973: Preface). The agents of this change are specifically Africans who are conscious of the international capitalist system that has underdeveloped Africa. Agents of change include other movement builders (receptive to all—race/ethnicity, class and gender)

who work for the overthrow and transformation of a system that has exploited and oppressed African society.

Through the lens of scholar and academic, what is most useful about this work is its ability to enlighten and transform. Walter Rodney reveals a hidden truth on the underdevelopment of Africa by Europeans. I find useful the method in which Rodney presented historical materialism. My critique is that Rodney could have employed a deeper analysis, connecting the current challenges plaguing Africa (infectious diseases, conflict, education, poverty, etc.) to the underdevelopment by imperialist nations. However, I realize that this literature was written in 1973, prior to the recognition of HIV/AIDS in Africa during the 1980s.

Through the lens of the activist and movement builder, what is most useful about this work is its ability to organize and stand in solidarity with those in the struggle to redevelop Africa. As a movement builder I would use this work to raise consciousness and collaborate with others to expose the inequality, injustice and exploitation of the capitalist system. This work was written during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, utilizing historical materialism, it speaks to the current global economic crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is rooted in the capitalist system. This confirms that history is always in motion.

This influential work has dramatically shaped my intellectual and political worldview. My level of consciousness has been raised. There is a call to action to maintain the legacy of this book in all spaces, including intellectual, political and movement building spaces.

Currently, my theoretical perspective and practice is being shaped as I explore the theory and practice of HIV/AIDS applied theatre and dance programs in African society. Theatre for development refers to the use of theatre as a tool for development education, often health education and community building. In the book, Walter Rodney proclaims that “culture is a total way of life” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.2:2). He lifts up the significant roles music and dance had on African society far before the arrival of the Europeans. The society was already developed, despite what is taught by the opposition. Music and dance was present at every occasion, be it an initiation, birth, marriage, death, etc. and “African peoples reached the pinnacle of achievement in that sphere” (Rodney, 1973: Ch.2:2). With this knowledge, rooted in Marxism, I can explore the use of issue-based (HIV/AIDS), aesthetically provocative theatre.

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